

Liberty Theatre

reopens

Cathy Asher and Toni Ness help bring back affordable movies to the Camas and Washougal community

By SANDRA WALTERS
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The aroma of fresh popcorn fills the main lobby of one of the few remaining family movie places in the area. The New Liberty Theatre, every night of the week since it reopened almost six years ago.

Cathy Asher and Toni Ness, co-owners of the theater, purchased the business from former owner Warren Dunn in November 1985. But, even before they bought it, they were already involved with the theater from the beginning of the renovations.

What made them decide to buy the theater? Well, it was for sale, Asher said.

"The former owner wanted out and offered the business to Cathy for a exorbitant amount," Ness said. "And when she got into the negotiation stages she came and asked me if I would like to be a partner, because she didn't want to do it by herself."

"I said, well geez, I'm not doing anything, so we started to negotiate," Ness said. "We were real fortunate to have people behind us," Asher said. "Glenn Farrell was always there to put a hand on your shoulder to say that you were doing OK." Then, in the month of November, Asher and Ness became business owners for the first time. They were in for some surprises.

"I'll never forget it," Ness said. "It was, of course, one of our slow months. Oh, what have we done."

But no business is what you expect it to be, they said.

"We walked into it real blind," Ness said.

One thing that keeps Asher and Ness going is just taking one step at a time, and they keep learning all the time. A major thing they learned when they first opened was about slow months that the film industry has, and that they last from October to December when the bigger theaters keep all of the holiday films and

there aren't any new films on the market. "It took months of calling different people in the (film) industry before they would even talk to us," Asher said, "because we didn't know what we were talking about."

Asher and Ness said that they had to prove themselves to the community and the industry everywhere. They also had to live down the reputation of the theater's colorful history.

"Cathy and I decided if we took over a business we could work with the community, where we could make it a community business," Ness said.

The New Liberty Theatre is involved in the community. They sponsored Grad Night at the Liberty for three years, they have benefit functions and special showing and tours for members of the Camas-Washougal communities as well as the surrounding areas.

The theater has undergone some changes in the past six years, one being the addition of the annex which holds video games and some extra food treats, such as hot dogs and ice cream. There has also been the annual upkeep and maintenance that includes painting, new carpet and other odds-and-ends.

Asher and Ness see the continuation of the family theater for a while still.

"I think we'll still be here five years from now," Asher said. "I think that there would be a public outcry if you took them away (family theaters)," Ness said. "Families need to do more things together, and things need to be more affordable. We're more than willing to bring the price (of the movie) down so you can bring your family to it."

"The film industry makes it real tough for us, they aren't pro budget house," Asher said. "All budget theaters are considered the blood suckers of the industry. They feel that we pull away the revenue of a large theater, that we're hurting the industry. We don't feel that we are because we put so much more effort into service that major theaters don't," Asher said.



TONI NESS and Cathy Asher helped reopen and renovate the New Liberty Theatre in Camas. The pair took over ownership from former owner Warren Dunn.